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Pilgrimage to India

(A talk given by Master Sheng-yen on November 6, 1989)

Today I will tell you about our recent trip to India and some of my thoughts and reflections on our pilgrimage to the country where Buddha was born and where Buddhism began.

Why did I want to go to India? What was the need? After all, Buddha's presence is everywhere. Why go somewhere else to find him? And Buddha passed into nirvana 2500 years ago. Buddha no longer exists in the India of today.

There are those that think that there is a special, intense spiritual presence in the holy places associated with the Buddha: where he was born, where he attained Buddhahood, where he taught and where he passed into nirvana. Such people hope that some of this spiritual power will brush off on them and help them reach enlightenment that much sooner.

When we actually arrived in India, we found little evidence of the Buddha. Buddhists no longer live in the holy places where the Buddha lived, practiced, and taught. Many of these sites have been barren and unpopulated for hundreds of years. There are only caretakers there now. They are not Buddhists nor are they practitioners. Thus anyone who thought that a pilgrimage to India would increase his knowledge of Buddhadharma might be disappointed.

I was aware of the state of Buddhism in India before the trip. For me it was a little like my trip to mainland China last year. I knew that Buddhism had been virtually destroyed by the communists. Nevertheless, I went and the trip was still very rewarding.

We stopped first in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Our real destination was Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of the Buddha, but the tourist agency arranged a tour of Kathmandu so that we would have some idea of the religion and culture of the country.

The Nepalese government allows the practice of three religions: Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. Other religions are not allowed. The majority of the people are Hindus. Next are the Moslems, and Buddhists are last in number, representing about 15% of the population.

Buddhists in Nepal generally belong to two traditions: the Tibetan tradition, which was first introduced to Nepal, and the Theravadan tradition, which was introduced more recently. A Buddhist in Nepal told me that the government in Nepal does not give a great deal of consideration to

Buddhists, because the high government officials and the King of Nepal are all Hindu practitioners. In fact, the Buddhist temples in Nepal, which belong to the Tibetan tradition, are so much like those of the Hindu tradition that it is hard to distinguish one from the other. We found this disappointing.

But the situation in mainland China is much the same. There are many people who cannot distinguish Taoism, one of China's native religions, from Buddhism. So when you think about it, the situation in Nepal is not so extraordinary. And there have been changes in Nepal. Monks and lamas came to Nepal after the takeover of Tibet by the communists, and they have created new branches of Tibetan Buddhism, whose temples represent an authentic tradition which is quite different from the ancient Tibetan temples that confuse Hinduism and Buddhism.

Some people in our group mistook the ancient Tibetan temples for holy places, and they made considerable donations. Since this was a pilgrimage, they reasoned that every spot we visited must be holy. But I finally made it clear that these are not really holy Buddhists sites.

Next we went to Patna, India. In the T'ang dynasty Tripitaka master Hsuan Tsang collected a number of sutras in this area, and Patna was his first stop in India. From Patna we went to the site of Nalanda University where Hsuan Tsang studied for many years. We made the trip by bus and we noticed that white lotuses lined both sides of the road wherever there was water. I was quite pleased, and I remarked

that it is no wonder that this is the land of the lotus. But we saw no more lotuses on our trip, at least until the very end when we arrived at Sravasti.

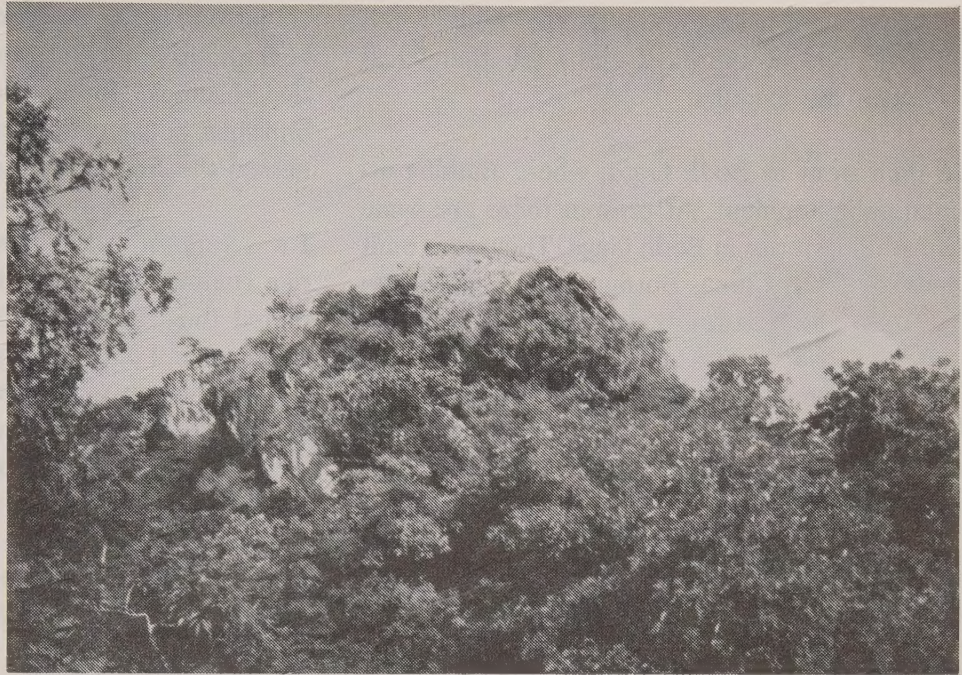
In its day Nalanda was renowned as a place of learning. Hundreds of professors and thousands of students taught and learned there. Now there is no one to teach and no one to learn. The university buildings and dormitories are all in ruins. The best kept building was a stupa built for Sariputra, and there we made prostrations. There was little else to see and do. Some of the people who maintain the area sold us some paper flowers to offer at the stupa when we made our prostrations. Then they tried to pick up the flowers so they could sell them to others. I told Guo Yuen Shih to make sure to retrieve them before we left.

From Nalanda we went to Rajgir, where Sakyamuni Buddha spoke the Diamond Sutra at the Bamboo Vihara. When we arrived, we found no vihara, which is a residence for monks, but we did see some bamboo growing, although it probably dates from a later time. Somewhere nearby

Nalanda



there was supposed to be a pond and a gazebo where an ancient Indian king asked the Buddha to preach. I said that because Buddha spoke there, there ought to be a spiritual presence that we could feel. I asked the tour guide if he knew exactly where the Buddha spoke, but neither he nor anybody else knew the exact location, so we were unable to find the right place to make our prostrations.



Mount Gridhrakuta (Vulture Peak)

I thought perhaps we might visit the pond and make prostrations there. We did not find the pond, but eventually we found the place where the king was supposed to have asked the Buddha to give a sermon. A statue of the Buddha was erected there to commemorate the event. There we made our prostrations. But I felt somewhat sad. This is supposed to be a holy place, but it seemed to possess no trace of the Buddha's presence and no spiritual quality at all. Could it really be a holy place? Later another tour guide said that even the authenticity of this location was in doubt. There was another place, he said, where the Bamboo Vihara might be. Nobody really knows where it is. At first I was disappointed, but I realized it does not matter where we make prostrations. The Buddha's presence is everywhere. What was truly important is that we had the mind to make the pilgrimage, and that we made our prostrations with that attitude.

We journeyed from Rajgir to nearby Mount Gridhrakuta (Vulture Peak). My master visited there fifteen years ago. He was too old to climb to the top, but I was in good health, so I climbed to the summit. Gridhrakuta does not look very

high from a distance. It is in fact one of the lower peaks among the surrounding mountains. I was surprised to find that Buddha spoke here and not at a higher point. But when we reached the top, we saw that, yes, this is truly a wonderful spot. This is Gridhrakuta, where the Buddha presented the Lotus Sutra as well as other sutras.

The Lotus Sutra describes as many as 80,000 humans and deities attending the Buddha's discourse. But there were 80 of us and we seemed to take up all the room there was on the peak. On the other hand, there is an open expanse all around the peak, so it is not hard to see how 80,000 people could sit in attendance. A tour guide told me that he had seen Sakyamuni Buddha speaking. I asked him how that could be. He said that all the surrounding trees looked like people, and he could imagine the Buddha speaking to them. I don't think the Buddha was just speaking to trees.

The afternoon was sunny at Gridhrakuta. It was an important occasion, so I shaved my head clean and dared not wear a hat. The sun hung high over head and burned down. I felt like my skin would

burn and peel away. Despite the heat I felt energetic, and by the day's end I felt that I had truly seen the Buddha.

We then went to Bodh Gaya, where Buddha attained enlightenment. At present there are some twenty monasteries at Bodh Gaya. They were built by monks from China, Burma, Sri Lanka, Japan and Tibet. The Tibetan monasteries predominate. At Bodh Gaya there is a stupa and next to it, a bodhi tree. Beneath the tree is the Diamond Seat where the Buddha actually sat in meditation and attained Buddhahood. I had seen pictures of these things before the trip. When I was actually there, I sat under the bodhi tree for more than half an hour. Knowing that this is the place where the Buddha was enlightened made me feel quite good.

Nothing really happened, but two leaves from the bodhi tree fell on me, for which I was very grateful. Guo Yuen Shih did much better than I. Someone offered him a bodhi tree when he left Bodh Gaya. I got two leaves, and he got a whole tree. Actually, the tree was for sale, but when Guo Yuen Shih was unwilling to pay, they gave it to him anyway.

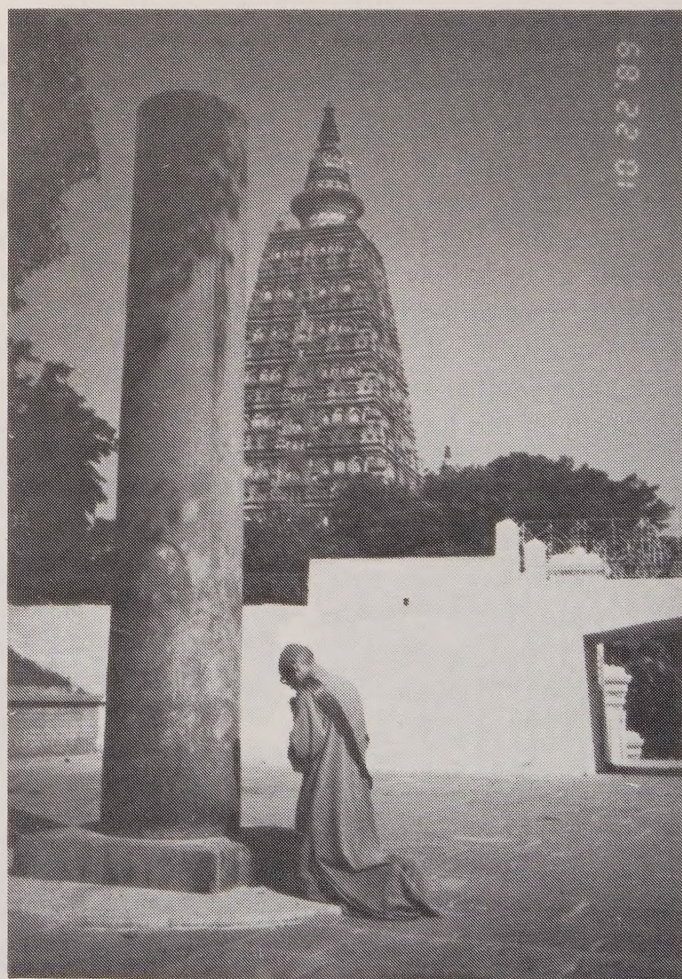
The next stop was Sarnath, the site of the "Deer Park," where Buddha gave his first sermon, before five monks. We saw some deer, but once again these are recent additions. There is a stupa to commemorate the Buddha's first sermon to the five bhikshus and a museum with recently uncovered artifacts. I was asked to give a Dharma talk, but I refrained because I thought, "How would I dare give a talk at the place where the Buddha first preached? When Buddha gave the sermon, the five bhikshus became arhats then and there. I am not an arhat. I simply have no right to give a lecture here."

The Deer Park at Sarnath is a very important location in Buddhism because it is the site of the first completion of the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. At Bodh

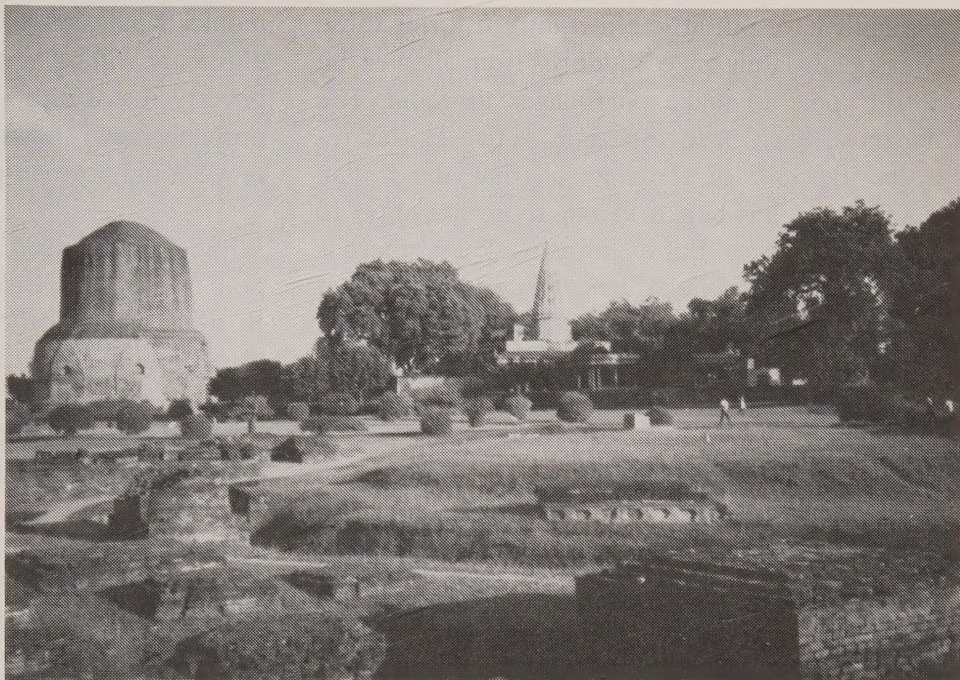
Gaya, Buddha attained enlightenment, but it was at Sarnath where he gave his first sermon to the five bhikshus. He taught the Dharma and the five bhikshus became the Sangha. Sarnath thus witnessed the first completion of the Three Jewels.

I was very moved at Sarnath. Buddha only spent one summer here, but during that time he completed the Three Jewels. I lingered there for a great while. I didn't really want to leave. We made prostrations to where Buddha gave the sermon, where he meditated, and also to the stupa for Ananda. We made prostrations to Ananda's stupa because he was responsible for the collection of the sutras after Buddha passed into nirvana. At Sarnath I really felt that I had seen the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

Bodh Gaya



The people who care for Sarnath are appointed by the government. They are not Buddhists. They watched us constantly. They would not let us take pictures, especially with the videos, unless we paid them. We would pay one person, and then another would come over looking for money. Eventually, I decided that it was only fair that we pay these people because, after all, they are taking care of a very holy place and we owe them our gratitude.



Sarnath--Deer Park

We next visited Kushinagara, where Buddha's parinirvana took place. Kushinagara is not very far from Sarnath, so we went there the same day. By the time we got there, the sun was setting. We made prostrations to a stupa, and I felt very sad, almost as if Buddha had truly left us. According to the sutra, Buddha passed into parinirvana in the evening, and it was in the evening that we arrived. Buddha's parinirvana took place between two trees, but we couldn't find the original trees when we got there. Two trees we did see were planted much later. We had to leave Kushinagara quickly because our tour guides warned us that bandits menace the area at night.

The next day we went back to Nepal to visit Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. What we saw was barren land. There were no flowers and only a few trees. When Buddha was born, it was a beautiful garden, with flowers blossoming everywhere. The flowers are gone now. There is still a pond. This is perhaps where Buddha's mother took a bath before she gave birth to Buddha. We only saw a few geese and nothing more.

Lumbini is very important to Buddhism, because it is where the Buddha was born. Without Sakyamuni's appearance in the world, Buddhism as we know it would not exist. When I was there I was filled with the wish that Lumbini could be rebuilt and show some of its former glory. Indeed, some of the local people told me that the Nepalese government is trying to raise money from Buddhists all over the world to restore Lumbini.

Our last destination was Sravasti. Buddha spent many years here and gave many sermons. Buddha spent 23 summers here; it is the place where Buddha spent the most time, and he presented most of the sutras here. Many attained their arhatship here. But what is Sravasti now? It is a bare piece of land in ruins. At one time there were many houses and viharas, but most of them were destroyed when the Moslems got to India. It's only recently that some of the original foundations were unearthed. Basically, what we saw were ruins.

Buddhism is no longer an important religion in India. Many Hindus have respect for the Buddha, but they do not respect holy Buddhist places. They

certainly have put little effort into restoring these areas. Only lately have Buddhists from all over the world come to make pilgrimages to India. The Japanese have been especially active in this respect. Because of the new pilgrims the Indian government has begun to pay more attention to these holy places. But as far as we know, there is no plan for rebuilding them. I certainly hope that many more Buddhists come from all over the world to make these pilgrimages. If more people go and are willing to help financially, the Indian government will be induced to give better protection or even rebuild these holy places.

Why should these holy places be protected and rebuilt? It is because we hope that Buddhism can be revived or at least have its presence felt in India. Right now Buddhism is practically nonexistent in India. In the last half century Tibetan Buddhism has made much progress in India, and in certain areas there are as many as 200,000 Tibetans living in communities organized or inspired by the Dalai Lama. So far these Tibetan Buddhists have had no significant impact on the Indian population.

There are other Buddhists in India, but they are mostly Theravadans. It is estimated that one half of one percent of the population in India is Buddhist, but I believe that this figure may be too high. I have not really given any thought to the prospect of transmitting Chinese Buddhism back to India. It is true that every one of the eight places holy to Buddhism in India has a Chinese temple, but only two of the temples are cared for by Chinese monks. The others are maintained by either Burmese or Sri Lankan

monks. I am disappointed that few Chinese Buddhists are willing to go to India. Perhaps it is the poverty that keeps them away. Conditions were probably much the same in Sakyamuni's time, and they should pose no problem for Buddhists today.

When I first arrived in India, I told the immigration officer that India is the mother country of Buddhism. The officer looked at me, and said, "No, it's not." I felt that I myself was a descendant of India, but the officer seemed to disallow what I felt. It must be that he simply did not believe that there was any connection between Buddhism and India.

I began my talk by saying that the pilgrimage to India had been very rewarding. I knew that Buddhism had disappeared from India, but going there gave me the opportunity to see and feel the places in which the Buddha moved and to sense the environment in which the Buddha gave us his teaching. I got a deeper sense of what the Buddha aspired to and what he achieved. What the Buddha accomplished was something wonderful and rare. No ordinary person could have done what he did. Thus our pilgrimage served to enhance our faith in the Dharma and to strengthen our resolve to spread the Dharma for the benefit of others.



In the Footsteps of the Buddha

by Anselma Rodriguez

I joined Shih-fu in a pilgrimage through India and Nepal last October. I was part of a New York group which joined another group from Taiwan. We were eighty people all together. Both India and Nepal are beautiful countries where modern and ancient mix to make a bewildering contrast.

Our first stop in a Buddhist place was Nalanda. We visited the ruins of an ancient university which had held more than 10,000 students. One could sense what it must have been like to be a student there by the beauty of the architecture.

The next site was Vulture Peak. We walked up the mountains under the smoldering heat. We made prostrations and paid our respect there. I looked out over a mountain range that seemed like an ocean of small rolling hills all green and blue into space and distance. Green mountains and valleys and blue sky gave the sense of peace and serenity that must have delighted the Buddha. Shih-fu was visibly moved by this site. From this point we could see a stupa built in the name of world peace.

After an arduous bus ride we arrived at Bodh Gaya at night. We went to meditate at the Mahabodhi Temple. It was quite impressive. The temple seemed like an ancient vision floating in the night. It has a huge pyramid like structure in the center. Its sides are ornate with carved images of the Buddha. We wore our black robes and visited the main hall and made prostrations. Then we did walking meditation, still wearing our black robes and barefoot. We chanted in a low voice as we circled the main stupa. The bodhi tree at the back seemed to shine with a light of its own. The gentle evening breezes moved its many leaves as if it has a chant of its own. I felt as if this was the first real walking meditation I had ever done. The whole atmosphere was both magical and mystical.

The following morning we visited the site once again. The place is as lovely during the day as it is at night. The bodhi tree is truly magnificent. Some Indian fellow motioned me to pour water on the tree and I did. Later after walking through the gardens of the Temple, I sat to meditate for twenty minutes. I felt refreshed and energetic at the end of the meditation. As I got up I saw Shih-fu also meditating. He was holding a fallen leaf from the bodhi tree.

Later we traveled to Sarnath, the site of the first discourse by Buddha. Shih-fu was quite moved. What impressed me was the fact that Buddha had stood on that spot and gave a sermon.

After that we went to the site where Buddha died and was cremated. We chanted the Heart Sutra and paid our respect to this holy place. The early evening was quiet, the sunset gave everything a reddish tint.

From there we went to Lumbini, in Nepal, the site of the Buddha's birth. Although the site does not look like anything special, I felt that this must have been quite a beautiful place during the Buddha's time. We had a picnic on that site. It was a relaxed place. There are trees and some gardens. There is a temple and the pool where the mother of Buddha took a bath before his birth. The whole place is kept with minimal care. It needs a lot more attention.

Our last stop in a Buddhist site was Sravasti. I felt as if we had stepped back in time. This is the place where the Buddha preached for many years. Again, the grounds were impressive, but in dire need of repair and care. Once again, as in so many other places, I felt that the most impressive thing was the fact that the Buddha had been there in human form.

Back in New Delhi I asked Shih-fu what the point was in taking a pilgrimage? Is there anything special about a site that the Buddha dwelled in? Shih-fu answered that we go on a pilgrimage to remember, to pay respect, and to deepen our faith. It is a way of practice. We go to commemorate what the Buddha did. The sites are special only to those who have faith. To non-believers all these places are just ordinary. Last, I asked Shih-fu why the Buddha appeared in India? He said that the Buddha always appears where he is needed the most.

The thrill of standing where the Buddha once stood strengthened my faith in ways I cannot describe or explain. Perhaps it was seeing Shih-fu moved sometimes almost to tears, and at other times to joy. Perhaps it was the land and its people who gave us Buddha. Or perhaps it is that my faith connected to the Buddha and those who follow in his footsteps. I hope to return, and I hope that you too may go there someday.

News Items

January: Shih-fu headed a conference in Taiwan devoted to "Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society." It lasted from January 12 to the 16 and was a huge success. Scholars read over 40 papers which will be compiled into a book. It was the first time three generations of professors spoke at a Buddhist conference: Prof. Kenneth Inada, followed by his student Prof. Charles Wei-Hsun Fa, and followed by his student, Dr. Steven Heine.

We celebrated Chinese New Year here at the Center on January 28. Over 250 people joined us for the day of chanting, vegetarian feast and a lecture by Master Jen Chun.

February: The Taiwan center celebrated the New Year on February 3-4. Over 8,000 people participated. About 30 booths displayed statues, paintings, stupas, and a video of the pilgrimage to India. In the afternoon of February 4, four hundred and twenty people took the 3 refuges--the largest ceremony Shih-fu ever conducted.

The following is the calendar of activities for March:

March 2-3: One-day Sitting Meditation

March 17: One-day Recitation of Buddha's Name

On March 31 from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. we will recite the Sutra of the Earth Store Bodhisattva. It is a way of paying respects to the deceased and transferring merit to them.

Applications are now being accepted for the seven-day intensive Retreats:

May 25, 7:00 p.m. to June 3, 8:00 p.m.

June 29, 7:00 p.m. to July 7, 8:00 p.m.

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